

Winning Over a Difficult Customer

Adapted From: Customer Service For Dummies, 2nd Edition

From www.Dummies.com

Service providers who don't learn how to work well with difficult people lose their hair, their marbles, and their customers. The nature of your job requires that you sometimes work with customers who may drive you up a wall. Here is a basic six-step process that can help you through trying times with difficult customers. The six steps are as follows:

1. **Let the customer vent.**
2. **Avoid getting trapped in a negative filter.**
3. **Express empathy to the customer.**
4. **Begin active problem solving.**
5. **Mutually agree on the solution.**
6. **Follow up.**

Letting the customer vent

When your customers are upset, they want two things: They want to express their feelings, and they want their problem solved. Some service providers view the customers' venting as a waste of time because they want to move on and solve the problem. However, trying to resolve the situation without first listening to the customers' feelings never works. Only after your customers have vented can they begin to hear what you have to say.

Nothing heats up customers with a problem faster than being told to calm down while they are venting. The best plan is to stay quiet and not make matters worse by interrupting the customer. Let the customers know that you are listening to them by doing these three things while they vent away:

- Nod your head frequently.
- Say uhh-huh from time to time.
- Maintain eye contact.

Even though the customer's anger may appear to be directed at you, remember that

you are simply the person they are venting to and don't take it personally.

Evading negative filters

The friction between you and a difficult customer is often worsened by how you interpret his or her behaviors. Take a moment and think of some of the names that you call your difficult customers — not to their face, but privately, under your breath. You may even want to jot a few of your favorites down in disappearing ink.

As soon as you pin one of these labels on a customer, it becomes a negative filter that dramatically changes how you see, speak, and listen to the other person. If left unchecked, negative filters can get out of control and spread like wildfire, creating a situation where positive communication with a customer is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Inevitably, you'll have negative filters about some of your customers, some of the time. The idea is to avoid getting stuck in these negative filters by switching to a service filter. You do so by asking yourself the question: "What does this customer need and how can I provide it?"

This question provides you with an alternative filter because as soon as you ask it, your focus changes. By changing where you aim your attention, you illuminate the issues that need to be addressed — rather than your personal feelings about the customer's behavior.

Expressing empathy

If you give customers a chance to vent, they will eventually run out of steam; then you can begin to participate more actively in the conversation. Giving a brief and sincere expression of empathy works wonders to calm a difficult customer. By letting customers know that you understand why they are upset, you build a bridge of rapport between you and them.

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is when you over-identify with the other person's situation.

Empathic phrases are a simple and easy way of conveying that you understand your customer's situation. The types of phrases that best express empathy to a customer include the following:

- I can see why you feel that way.
- I see what you mean.
- That must be very upsetting.
- I understand how frustrating this must be.
- I'm sorry about this.

Some service providers feel uncomfortable apologizing to the customer because they see it as an admission of guilt. Saying "I'm sorry" to a customer does not imply that you or your company did anything wrong; it simply conveys that you are genuinely sorry that the customer has had a bad experience. By using a genuinely warm and caring tone, you enhance the meaning and effectiveness of empathic phrases.

Actively problem solving

Begin active problem solving by asking questions that help clarify the cause of the customer's problem. As you ask the customer questions, be sure to listen to everything she says and don't jump to conclusions.



Customers sometimes leave out critical information because they think it is unimportant or they just forget to tell you. When you need specific information from a customer (especially when he is off in another direction), use the *bridging technique*. This technique builds a bridge between what the customer is saying and where you want the conversation to go. As you notice the conversation veering off track, wait for the customer to take a breath. (It may be a quick breath, but they all breathe eventually.) This is your cue to jump in with an empathic phrase followed by a question that steers the conversation back on course. Chances are that the customer will immediately come back to the point and provide you with the information you need.



Upset customers rarely present the facts of their story in a neat little package. You may have to do some detective work to make sure that you understand everything they are telling you. Use the *mirroring technique* to summarize your understanding of what the customer says, and then reflect it back to them. The customer then has the chance to verify or correct your understanding of the situation.

Mutually agreeing on the solution


After you gather all the facts, you need to work with your customer to come up with an acceptable resolution. If you haven't already discovered what will make him happy, ask. You may, at this point, find it necessary to take a brief time-out from the customer so that you can do the behind-the-scenes work necessary to solve the problem. In this case, be sure that the customer knows exactly why you are asking him to wait and how long it will take for you to get back to him. Finally, when you both agree on how to resolve the problem, explain the steps that you will take to implement the solution.



Don't promise what you can't deliver. Be honest and realistic when telling the customer what you will do.

Following up

You can score big points on the service scoreboard by following up with your customers — by phone, e-mail, or letter — to check that the solution worked. If you contact the customer and find out that he or she is not satisfied with the solution,



continue to look for another, more workable solution.

Effective follow-up also includes fixing the procedures that are causing the problem to begin with. By spending time solving internal service delivery problems, you prevent them from occurring in the future.